SOME PEOPLE I HAVE MET

The True Joaquin Miller.

BY JOHN MAGUIRE.

Many and talented were the numerous contributors to a literary paper, "The Golden Era," which flourished in San Francisco up to about thirty years ago. Many an Apollo's spring poetry sprouted for the first time in its entertaining pages. It was published during the days when California boasted of a brilliant intellectual galaxy of writers, both of prose and poetry.

It was contemporary with the Augustan age of music and drama in San Francisco. It was when Bret Harte, Mark Twain, Joe Goodman, R. M. Daggett, "Dan De Quills," and others of equal fame, gave the journalism of the Pacific coast a national reputation and under whose aegis such present-day well known writers as Sam Davis of the Carson Appeal, Arthur McEwen of San Francisco, Ned Townsend of "Chimmie Fadden" fame matriculated and others who have since become noted as playwrights and novelists, such as Archie Gunther, Clay Greene Fitch and Howard Taylor. Among the valued poetical contributors to the "Golden Era," Dan O'Connell, a grandson of the Liberator—the Irish Demosthenes—must not be forgotten, while the poems of "Minnie Myrtle Miller" were looked forward to with much appreciation by many critical admirers.

The transpiring of a longer lapse of time, however, became noticeable in the appearance of Mrs. Miller's muse. It was supposed that increasing family cares had interrupted her literary work, while, on the other hand, the name of her husband, Joaquin Miller, began to be quoted with admiration among the literati of the city by the Golden Gate. His "Songs of the Sierras" appeared and he was hailed as a genius.

There is a story told that D'Alembert's nurse and housekeeper continually upbraided him for the continuous time he spent in his study. "You will never be anything better than a genius," was her usual saying, "and what's a genius?—a fool who wears out his life to be spoken of after he is dead."

There is no question but that Minnie Myrtle Miller was in their early married life a most industrious writer, and those that knew their home life in Oregon knew well that she was the "potboiler" for the family.

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Like unto greater literary geniuses than Joaquin, as his reputation grew so did the eccentricity that genius claims for its own, and it is pertinent to find out how far those eccentricities and perversities of genius, these inconveniences and defects, are really, as some men say they are, an essential part of genius as such; how far there is that antagonism between domesticity and genius which has been boldly asserted, how far the affections are indeed powerless against the tyranny of ideas—in plain words, how far genius excuses its possessor from the obligations of ordinary morality. We know that great minds are sent into the world for great ends; that it is not meant they should leave things just as they found them, yet once the position of leader is granted to them—once men recognize a master mind, and whether he be poet or painter he is encouraged in a degree of egotism that quite outtops the assumption of common men, and I must say this is more notoriously conspicuous in actors than in any other individuals.

Joaquin Miller was now becoming the rage. He wrote at a time when the literature of the forest and the prairie, of the Indian camp and the backwood settlement, of the trapper's hunting ground and the California gold mines was the vogue. It was a literature peculiarly American. It was then that Joaquin Miller conceived the idea of seeking further fame beyond the seas, and virtually abandoned his wife and children. Much suffering and want was all that was left for those behind. Again Minnie Myrtle Miller's pen was busy, and poems and prose articles found their way to some papers and magazines, but the remuneration was small and remittances few. It was now loudly whispered and openly printed that after all Joaquin's reputation was "bogus," inasmuch as he simply appropriated the brain children of his wife and assumed their paternity. This, however, in justice to him, was not so. The poet's conduct toward his family was universally condemned by those who best knew them in their Oregon home, and the papers were loud in their denunciation of his act. Meantime Mrs. Miller came out in a communication addressed to the public, and worded with as keen a sense of irony as could well be penned. While admitting the truth of all that had been published, she held that the public had nothing to do with Mr. Miller, except as a poet, and that poets are different from other people and their lives must be judged, if at all, by a different standard. Listen to this: "Mr. Miller felt that he was gifted, and his mind being of a fine poetic structure, and his brain very delicately organized, the coarse and practical duties of providing for a family and the annovance of children conflicted with his dreams and his literary whims."

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Joaquin went to England. For a time he was lionized, after a fashion, in London. We are told he affected a very broad-brimmed hat, a red shirt a la Garibaldi, and tucked his trousers into his high bootlegs, when the demands of polite or rather fashionable society prescribed the usual modish black and white.

During the poet's sojourn in the English metropolis as a compatriot he was made much of by the American colony there, and at some function given in honor of Rose Eytinge, then on her return from Egypt, with her husband, George Butler, when he had filled a term as our consul, Miller was presented to her, and it appears that during Miss Eytinge's stay in London they met at many such gatherings, so that they became well acquainted.

On Miss Eytinge's return to America she emerged from retirement and again resumed her profession and accepted the leading position in the celebrated Union Square company, where her successes were many and so pronounced that she began a starring tour in her famous roles in "Led Astray," "Rose Michel," "The Geneva Cross" and other such plays as then were the great attractions of New York. Her success artistically and financially was exceedingly great. She was a grand artist, her fame being then at its zenith. When Miss Eytinge made her second visit to the Pacific coast, I then managing the Newmarket theatre in Portland, Ore., and knowing what a strong attraction the lady would be for an engagement there, I arrived in San Francisco and lost no time in calling on her to lay my proposition before her regarding a Portland visit. I might remark here that I had the honor of previously meeting and was well acquainted with Miss Eytinge, as I played the juvenile and character leads in her support when she first visited California. Having talked over our matter of business, I was desired to call back on the stage at the Baldwin theatre, where she was then playing, that night. I did so, and during an intermission, while engaged in conversation, a young girl, I should think not more than 15 years old, addressed a question to Miss Eytinge concerning some matter of costume, and getting a reply departed. Immediately Miss Eytinge turned toward me, asking if I knew who the girl was. Replying in the negative, she informed me that she was the daughter of our famous Joaquin Miller, and that having discovered who she was, and but a ballet girl in the theatre, having met her father in London, she on that account took quite an interest in her welfare and sought plans for her advancement.

Miss Eytinge knew that I was engaging some additional members for my company at Portland, and she there and then pleaded with me to give Maud Miller a chance to play little parts and begin her novitiate as an actress in the profession. Her earnestness and eloquence prevailed, and Miss Maud Miller was duly enrolled as a member of my company.

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Meantime Miss Eytinge had filled her Portland engagement. Maud Miller settled down to regular work in my stock company. She was most ambitious and had the proper temperament for an actress, being romantically idealistic and of a fervid imagination. Her progress gave much promise. Meantime years had already passed since Joaquin deserted his family. Maud Muller and her younger brother had never known a father's care, at least enough to remember him by. Minnie Myrtle Miller obtained a divorce from Joaquin and unfortunately married again. Her second husband was a printer by trade and husband was a printer by trade and a habitual drunkard. Both she and the children had a miserable existence, sinking far downward in the social scale, until at last they took quarters in a low neighborhood, their next door neighbors being a married couple addicted to drinking, and who on such occasions badly abused their only child, a girl about 10 years of age.

Now Maud Miller had the kindliest sympathy for this poor, ill-treated child, and while her own home life was wretched enough, yet she managed to endure without complaint her own sufferings until one day the poor girl returned to the place she called home. The fellow who took the place of a father, it being salary day at the theatre, demanded that she should deliver to him her small pittance. She could not comply; she had already spent the money in certain purchases. He beat her, and the poor child toward whom Maud acted in real life the part of a "lovey Mary" cried aloud in sympathy, the only effect of which was to incur similar brutal treatment from her drunken parents. Maud attended to her duties at the theatre as usual that night. Pride prevented her making any confident among her associates as to her home life. The steamship Oregon was announced to sail for San Francisco at 4 a. m. next morning. At 1 o'clock a. m. a young girl, leading a little boy, was seen going on board, and was assigned to a berth which had been previously engaged, but they never made the trip. The fates destined otherwise.

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About 5 a. m. there was a knocking at my bedroom door in the Clarendon hotel. It was summer time and full daylight. On opening the door I was accosted by a policeman, and with much alarm in his voice I was told that one of my acresses was in jail and that I was wanted to get her out. In a few words I was sure enough satisfied that one of the company was in some trouble, which, however, no stretch of imagination on my part could guess the nature of. Knowing the personnel of my people so well, I was satisfied that there was some hideous mistake, and therefore thought lightly of it. Having dressed, I accompanied the policeman to police headquarters, and there, sure enough, was Maud Miller in the sergeant's office, the poor child, a most woeful looking sight, her hair all dishevelled, her cheeks tear-stained and colorless, who, on seeing me enter, went into hysterical sobs as if her poor heart was breaking. I soon got the particulars. Tired of the cruel treatment inflicted both on herself and on the little partner in misery who lived next door to her, and seeing no release from such abuse, she concluded to surreptitiously leave for San Francisco, taking with her the object in view she had for a few weeks previous put aside a little each week from her salary, and on the yesterday when she got paid she secured passage to the steamer for San Francisco, purchased a little boy's cheap suit of clothes, in which she dressed her little companion, having cut off the youngster's curls before going on board, hoping by this ruse that they would leave no trace behind. Alas, the best laid plans, etc., etc. About 2 o'clock in the morning Maud was arrested on the charge of kidnaping, while the child in disguise was dragged home by her irate father and mother. I immediately got into communication with Chief of Police Lapius and also in due time with a very close friend of the Miller family, Tony Noltner, the editor and proprietor of the Portland Standard. Mr. Noltner took a very great interest in the children and immediately communicated with Maud's grandparents, who lived on a farm in Lane county. Meantime Mr. Noltner and I gave a bond securing her liberation, and instead of permitting her to return to her miserable home, had made provisions for her at the Clarendon hotel, where other ladies of the company were stopping. Of course the circumstances of the case were duly flashed over the wires by the Associated Press, and while it was before the era of yellow journalism, yet it lacked no sensational elements in its transmission and was again the means of attracting public attention to Joaquin's domestic peccadilloes. Joaquin having scored a quasi-success in England had just returned to New York, "with all his honors thick upon him," when Maud's escapade made food for gossip at every breakfast table in Gotham, the comments of some papers being very uncomplimentary to his poetship.

The Poet of the Sierras left immediately for Portland, where in due time he was registered at the Clarendon hotel. To Mr Noltner and myself he was most profuse in his expressions of gratitude.

In a few days after Maud's trial for kidnaping was called the prosecuting attorney, the victim and the witnesses were all present in dreadful array and the judge "settled out so determined and big" had the case called. John H. Gearin then my attorney and now the honorable United States senator from Oregon, looked after the culprits interest.

Whether it was a postponement of the case indefinitely or a sentence deferred for the same limitless period, to this day I don't know. But Maud accompanied her father east on the following day, where he declared he would place her in some boarding school. The eccentricity of genius, however, soon manifested itself between father and daughter, for it was but a very short time after that Maud joined a theatrical company and continued in the profession until her death, about one year ago.

About ten years ago, looking over the morning paper, I happened to read an item how Joaquin Miller's son was arrested, tried and found guilty for either horse stealing or impeding the progress of the United States mail. This happened in the Klamath country, near the lava beds where Joaquin Miller, with a Modoc squaw as wife, lived with the tribe for some years previous to his meeting with Minnie Myrtle. After the Modoc war, Joaquin was loud in his denunciation of the government. Immediately after the Modoc war he published his "Life Among the Modocs." If that book has any redeeming feature it is that it is the record of a self-confessed monster of ingratitude, an animal of unnatural dimensions. In this book he tells us he lived the life of an Indian among the Indians and far away from the whites. In a mystic way he leads us to suppose that he married an Indian girl, by whom he had a child. He had their confidence. He was the great apologist for "Captain Jack" and his "brave little band of heroes," who in cold blood shot down the peace commissioners sent to make a treaty with them on behalf of the government. So great was Joaquin's admiration for them that he was going to rear "a monument of stones where the last Modocs fell and name the place Thermopylae."

What "pathos," or rather what "bosh." Sterne could find himself shedding tears of sympathy upon the sight of a dead jackass, but that heart possessed of such humane feeling towards the defunct donkey shrivelled so that it could be entombed in a thimble at the mere thought of his aged father left to starve in a garret. Joaquin says he found the Indians the most peaceable, upright and gentle of beings," but one day some hostile Indians entered his tent and stole everything contained. Mr. Miller accordingly gathered a company of whites and followed on the trail of the plunderers. He found them encamped not far from "Castle Lake," a sweet, peaceful place overhung by mountain cypress and sweeping cedars." He and his comrades, with their rifles, surrounded the Indians, who were armed only with bows and arrows, and fired in upon them. The Indians were all killed and their camp plundered and burned.

What a mixture of hypocrisy, sentimentality and cruelty. Here is this great friend of the Indians, for the loss of a few portable articles, avenging their loss by sacking a whole camp and shooting down the males. He returned to his camp and was ready to take part in another fresh massacre of the Indians. An Indian tribe had killed some white settlers. The number of settlers possibly did not exceed ten. Mr. Miller says "possibly it was a massacre, but the Indian account of it shows them to have been as perfectly justified as ever one human being can be for taking the life of another." By a curious train of events he finds himself a leader against these Indians. "Two decisive battles, or rather massacres, took place and perhaps 500 Indians perished." Here Joaquin expresses repentance for what he did. These are his words: "Most of the men are dead now, but scattered around somewhere on earth a few may be found and they will tell you that by my energy, recklessness and knowledge of the country and Indian customs, I, and I only, made the bloody expedition a success. I feel this in sorrow. It is a thousand times more to my shame than honor, and I shall never cease to regret it. Before leaving the valley we surprised a camp by stealing upon it at night and lying in wait until dawn. It was a bloody affair for the Indians. More than a hundred lay heaped together about a lodge where they fell by rifle, pistol and knife. The white butchers scalped the dead, every one."

This bloody ruffianism needs no comment here.

The parties figuring in this story, save a few, are now no more. At Oakland, overlooking the bay of San Francisco, there is a hermitage in the shape of a cottage of primitive construction. The place and the surroundings somehow bear the atmosphere of the mountain pines, patches of flowers and mottled rocks give a reminiscent tinge of the wildwood. The cottage or cabin is inhabited by a keen-eyed, gray-bearded old man. In its close vicinity there are three almost newly made graves. They contain all that is mortal of Grandma Miller, Maud Miller and her second husband, Edward Holden; and there in the rays of the setting sun we will now leave alone with his thoughts and with his dead the poet of the Sierras, Joaquin Miller.

JOAQUIN MILLER.